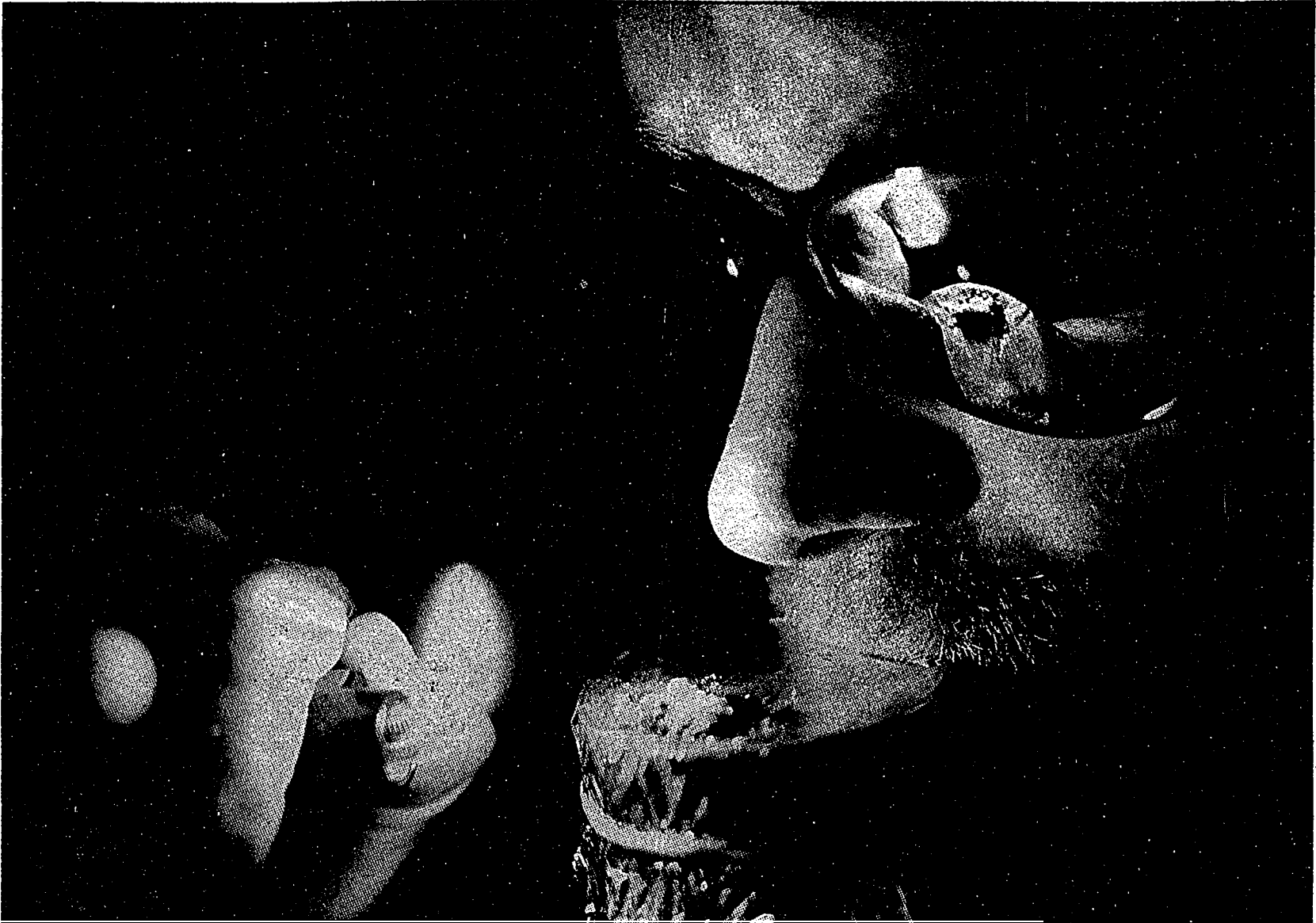


The super-drug crack has arrived on estates in south London and Merseyside. **DAVID BROWNE** went to buy some.



CRACK



TO OBSCURE his real identity we can call him Charlie. In his late twenties, he was until recently a mid-level drugs dealer who sold heroin and cocaine to addicts and rustlers in the streets, pubs and council housing estates of south London.

Charlie made a comfortable living from his trade. His income last year, he says, was around £12,000. It was enough to buy him a powerful sound system, a second-hand fastback and two Rotweiler attack dogs, status symbols in the drugs demimonde he inhabits.

But then Charlie's world began, inexorably, to unravel. He broke the cardinal rule of the drug business and began to smoke the goods. Charlie discovered crack, a potent, smokeable and 'instantly addictive' derivative of cocaine.

After seven years of relentless growth in the United States, crack has arrived in Britain. In two recent raids on the homes of suspected London drug dealers, police found large quantities of baking soda, a vital ingredient in the manufacture of crack. Although its use here is still mainly uncharted, it has already acquired an all-British name of its own: 'ready-wash.'

LAST WEEK Charlie and two fellow 'crackheads' took me to a vast concrete housing estate in south London where crack is on sale for between £20 and £25 a deal.

Posing as a cocaine trafficker, with good South American connections, I had challenged them to show me a 'rock house', the name given to drugs dens where crack is sold in the United States.

I told them I didn't believe crack could be bought in Britain. Their claims about the availability of the drug in this country, I hinted, were the die boasts of young men anxious to prove their street credibility to an outsider.

Within minutes, as we walked across elevated walkways and padded down ill-lit alleys, I was lost. I soon realised that this was their intention from the outset. They had only half-swallowed my bait.

When we approached the rock house, one of the group — a tall, powerfully built teenager with close-cropped hair and a smile that flashed between barely suppressed venom and roguish charm — grabbed my arm.

'That's as far as you go, man,' he barked, pushing me up against a wall. 'We stay here. They'll buy the crack but there's no way you go any further. There's nothing for you there. It's just in and out. These people don't do no talking. Just relax.'

The youth moved away and idled against a metal railing. One eye remained trained on me, the other on the passage from which Charlie and his comrade emerged a few minutes later.

'Did you get the crack?' I

asked. 'Let's go,' he ordered, opening a clenched fist to reveal five whitish-coloured rocks of crack. Our walk quickened to a steady jog and we headed for another flat on the estate where he and his friends would smoke the narcotic.

INSIDE the flat Charlie stripped to his waist and started to talk freely about his addiction. A nine-inch knife scar running across his belly, the result of a fight over drugs, lent a certain conviction to his conversation.

Holding up a nugget of crack between his thumb and forefinger before he began to make a pipe from a glass and aluminium foil, he said: 'We call this ready-wash. It's a very dangerous game. People will kill for this stuff. I've been robbed at gunpoint. I've been tied up by people wanting money for crack.'

'I've had to sell everything. Every night I spend at least £60 on rock, sometimes more than that. When you pipe you can't sleep. Sometime I still buy it at five or six in the morning. When you are licking (smoking) with your friends you get the flavour. You don't want to go home. You can't sleep. You only want more, more, more.'

He pulled out a large mirror, its surface streaked and blurred by traces of cocaine and spittle, and began the ritual of preparing the first pipe of the evening. There was a deft and expert rhythm, cut with the excitement of anticipation, to his work, as he first crushed and then chopped a small rock of crack with a steel razor-blade.

Inhaled deeply

Carefully, he placed fresh cigarette ash and then crack on the pipe's bowl, a series of neat pinholes in the foil. A slit which curved along the opposite lip of the glass served as a mouthpiece. Applying a match, he inhaled slowly and deeply. The crack burned away in one hit. And his talk became more animated, intense, as the drug took hold.

'Crack gives you confidence. You don't care if somebody is laughing at you. You just feel confident that you are "The Man". Heroin is a real comedown. I only took it once to see what it was like. But you feel dizzy. I don't want no more. Ready-wash is the thing now. Sniffing is out.'

'I realise that crack is a very, very bad habit. But once you've tasted a pipe you just want more. I haven't had any work since I've started doing it. Every night I'm on it. There are a lot of people doing it. It's getting to be like the States right now.'

IN SEVEN short years, since it first surfaced in the notorious Los Angeles ghetto of Watts, crack has swept through America's cities, snaring hard-core drug users, teenagers, businessmen, people from every social stratum, in its web of psychological dependence and physical craving. It has even killed unborn babies, the innocent victims of crack-addicted mothers. It is estimated that America already has one million crack abusers.

The drug is crystallised cocaine base, similar to but more powerful than the 'pasta' or 'basuko' smoked in cigarettes by many Andean South Americans, who prefer it to snorting the powdered cocaine hydrochloride that is readily available in Britain.

It is made by a comparatively simple method of 'cooking' cocaine powder with water and baking soda, which removes the impurities added by wholesalers and street dealers to boost profit margins. The resulting mixture — between 70 to 90 per cent pure cocaine — is dried, cracked into small chips, or 'rocks', and usually smoked in pipes.

Likened to 'a kick in the head' and labelled 'the ultimate street drug of the Eighties,' crack has an explosive effect on the brain, producing a feeling of manic energy and euphoria.

But the high it induces is measured in minutes not hours. It is often followed by equally powerful emotions of anxiety, depression and paranoia. Some experts estimate that three out of four first-time users become instantly addicted. Mental and physical deterioration is dramatic.

If the US crack experience is any indicator, Britain can now expect a new and frightening dimension to be added to its own escalating drugs problem.

Because of its volatile effect on the user and its addictive qualities, crack leads to a significant increase in violence, muggings, burglaries, theft and other crimes. Ease of manufacture, means that for the first time processing of a highly toxic Class A drug has reached street level. Profitability — a £1,200 investment in an ounce of cocaine can be turned into £3,600 worth of crack — is high.

MEANWHILE cocaine, the raw material of crack, continues to flood into Britain. Last year it displaced heroin as the biggest drugs threat facing the country. Seizures by Customs and Excise officers rose from 99 kilos in 1986 to 358 kilos, an increase of 261 per cent. The haul of heroin rose from 179 to 189 kilos in the same period.

'In 1987 we detected more cocaine than in the whole of the previous five years, and I am afraid that the amount of cocaine being smuggled will increase,' a top Customs and Excise officer told *The Observer*. 'Three years ago we had one specialist team investigating the importation of cocaine. Today we've got four.'

The principal traffickers, say law enforcement officials, are: Colombia's infamous Medellin cartel, seeking to expand their network into Europe because of cocaine overproduction in South America and the saturation of their traditional North American market; organised British gangs which were formed in the 1950s; and Nigerians, and Jamaican 'Yardies', who have begun to muscle in on the lucrative US crack market with unprecedented ruthlessness.

The price of cocaine on the street has fallen from £80 to £60 a gram and even £50 in some areas, at 15 to 25 per cent is poor.

With the spread of cocaine have come the strategies and urban drug-dealing tactics of Watts, the South Bronx's 'Fort Apache' and Miami's Carol City. Fortified drugs dens, modelled on American 'rock houses', are becoming increasingly commonplace in Britain's major cities. Protected by armoured doors, wrought-iron gates and peep holes, they make surprise police raids more difficult and give dealers the extra

few minutes needed to dispose of illegal caches.

On Merseyside, as in London, the crack genie is already out of the bottle. Last month in Toxteth police raided two houses which they believed had been used for the manufacture of the drug. Five people, three of them women, were arrested.

Mr Allan Parry, the drugs and aids co-ordinator of Merseyside Regional Health Authority, who has recently

returned from a fact-finding trip to New York, said: 'The word is now around. Certainly most drug users I talk to have now heard about crack and would love to use it.'

And in London a senior officer of the Central Drugs Squad confided: 'From what I have seen and heard about crack in America, I would be terrified if we had a crack explosion here.' Detectives working London's drug-in-

festated inner-city beats voice the same fears.

Anyone doubting the potential threat posed to British society by crack should first listen to Mrs Clara Hale, a sprightly octogenarian who has weaned off drugs more than 400 babies born to addict mothers in her Harlem clinic, Hale House.

Affectionately known as Mother Hale to the people of New York, she said: 'The heroin and cocaine babies are

■ Above left, rocks of crack, and above, the drug being smoked, photographed last week in south London by John Reardon.

fighting to live. But the crack babies have no desire to live. They come today; tomorrow they die. And the mothers don't want them, either. All they want is to get out of hospital and get some crack.'